MEETING NATURAL CONSUMERS’ NEEDS IN THE MEAT CASE

Strong supplier partnerships and a focus on education and transparency can help retailers meet consumer demands for natural pork and beef.

Consumers are going back to basics and increasingly demanding simplified products that feature ingredients and label claims that are easy to understand. This focus on natural products has extended to the meat case, including beef and pork. Seventy percent of Americans prefer to get their protein from animal sources, according to Packaged Facts’ 2017 report Meat and Poultry: U.S. Retail Market Trends and Opportunities, which underscores the need to reach this consumer in the meat aisle.

Growth in the overall natural category is leading consumers to demand more and more from natural products, including more verifiable claims, and has sparked increased interest in the traceability, humane handling and sustainability of their meat products. Certain consumer categories are more focused on this label claim than others, and most natural consumers are women under the age of 54, according to data from advertising company Mediamark Research and Intelligence and Tyson Fresh Meats. They have higher incomes, families and a high level of education. They also read labels and research products. As the primary shoppers for their households, they control what goes in the grocery basket. What’s more, this consumer is willing to spend on products that check all the boxes.

* Minimally processed. No artificial ingredients.
“The consumer who buys natural meat products is one that is less [concerned] about saving money and more about finding the products that align with their values,” said natural consumer expert Kerry Beauchemin of Midan Marketing. “This consumer is trying to simplify their life in more ways than one and getting back to basics in the food and fresh meats aisle is critical.”

Beyond simply looking for “natural” label claims in the meat aisle, these consumers are increasingly seeking more verifiable claims, including those surrounding animal welfare and sustainability. This consumer “seeks out quality products that align with her green values,” Beauchemin added. “For this consumer, green goes beyond just saying to doing – a company’s sustainability record is important in her decision-making process.”

BUILDING AND CONVEYING TRANSPARENCY

Focusing on product transparency is key to reaching and keeping the natural consumer. These issues, including sourcing, animal welfare and sustainability practices, are driving spending. In fact, 70% of consumers want companies to be transparent about their sustainability efforts, according to the Hartman Group report Sustainability 2017: Connecting Benefits With Values Through Personal Consumption.

Products with special attributes specifically drove meat sales last year, according to findings from the 2018 Power of Meat survey, while conventional product growth was flat. Claim awareness had the largest impact on consumers’ purchases at the meat case. Since more than half of consumers are concerned about animal welfare, partnering with processors that are increasingly focusing on this aspect of handling and being more transparent with consumers about their practices can enhance sales.

For instance, Tyson Foods’ FarmCheck® program, launched in 2012, retains third-party auditors to evaluate livestock farms that supply animals to the company. Auditors check to make sure animals have access to food and water, and that farms enforce appropriate human-animal interactions and provide farm worker training.

Efforts like this can translate to increased spending at the meat counter. In fact, a transparent product...
is more likely to be selected at the meat case over a competitive product, according to the Hartman Group report. Tyson Foods’ Open Prairie® Natural Meats brand specializes in fresh beef and pork products to meet this consumer need.

“Natural according to USDA means minimally processed and no artificial ingredients;” said Kent Harrison, vice president of marketing and premium programs at Tyson Fresh Meats. “We’ve tried going beyond that definition to make sure our products are defined by no antibiotics ever, no hormones or growth promotants** and 100% vegetarian-fed, except for milk.”

The animals processed to make these products are also segregated from conventional product from farm to store, Harrison added. Focusing on sustainability extends to shipping as well. The company delivers Open Prairie Natural Meats brand products in boxes made from renewable fiber sourced from responsibly managed forests.

**ENHANCING EDUCATION**

While consumers want transparency and natural products, educating them about product attributes remains essential to ensuring they understand what sets products apart in the marketplace. “This consumer is a label reader,” Beauchemin said. “She buys natural products primarily because she believes it’s better for her family.”

Only one third of shoppers believe they are well-informed about label claims, according to Packaged Facts. This uncertainty offers a significant area of opportunity for retailers to reach these consumers. In particular, more than half of Millennials are confused about label claims, yet these are the consumers most likely to be interested in and enter the natural meats market.

Since these consumers are most concerned about meat products coming from animals that have never been given antibiotics, added hormones or growth promotants and were vegetarian-fed, Open Prairie Natural Meats has prominent callouts on its product labels, as well as in-store messaging and marketing materials. Conveying this brand story to consumers helps enhance their understanding of label claims and can thereby enhance sell-through for these products. Educating meat counter employees and empowering them to engage and educate consumers is also a winning strategy, Beauchemin added.

**Federal regulations prohibit the use of added hormones or growth promotants in pork.**
CONNECTING WITH THE CONSUMER, NATURALLY

Consumers say they value visuals most when selecting groceries, according to a study by GNT Group, so in-store marketing, as well as digital efforts, can help attract consumers to natural meat products. Using buzzwords on labels and reaching the consumer via mobile marketing can also help draw them to the meat case. In addition to transparency, consumers also want operational excellence when it comes to meat products, the Power of Meat survey found. This includes in-stock performance, outstanding customer service at the meat case and consumer outreach. Tyson Fresh Meats’ scale can help retailers continually reach consumers and ensure a reliable product stream.

“We can bring quantity and quality of product to easily meet those customers’ needs,” said Harrison. “The retailer needs a consistent supply that is financially viable.”

Consumer interest in natural meats is expected to keep growing. In fact, free-from label claims are expected to grow nearly 3% through 2020, according to Packaged Facts. Using targeted marketing and partnering with proven leaders in the category, such as Tyson Fresh Meats’ Open Prairie Natural Meats brand, can help broaden the customer base for natural meat products.

“We want to be a leader in the category of never-ever,” said Harrison. “And we can lead in the size of capability, in addition to product excellence.”

ABOUT OPEN PRAIRIE

The Open Prairie Natural Meats brand has meat with no antibiotics ever and no added hormones. The brand team is dedicated to working with independent farmers and ranchers who protect the natural resources around them and commit to a healthy environment for the animals.

The brand is built on the belief that nothing good comes easy—quality meat requires hard work, patience and respect for the land. It sticks to the basics and honors simplicity, meaning the meat is all natural—the way nature intended it to be.

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